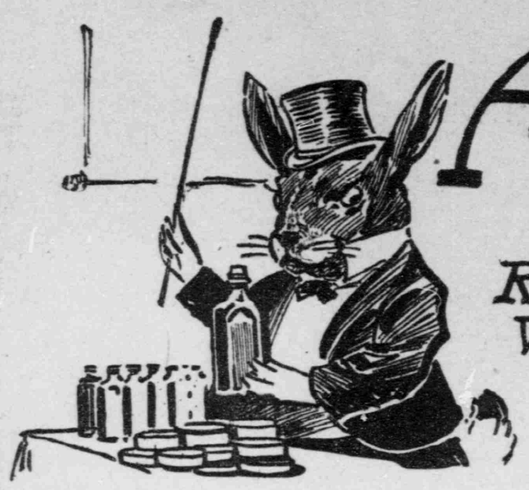
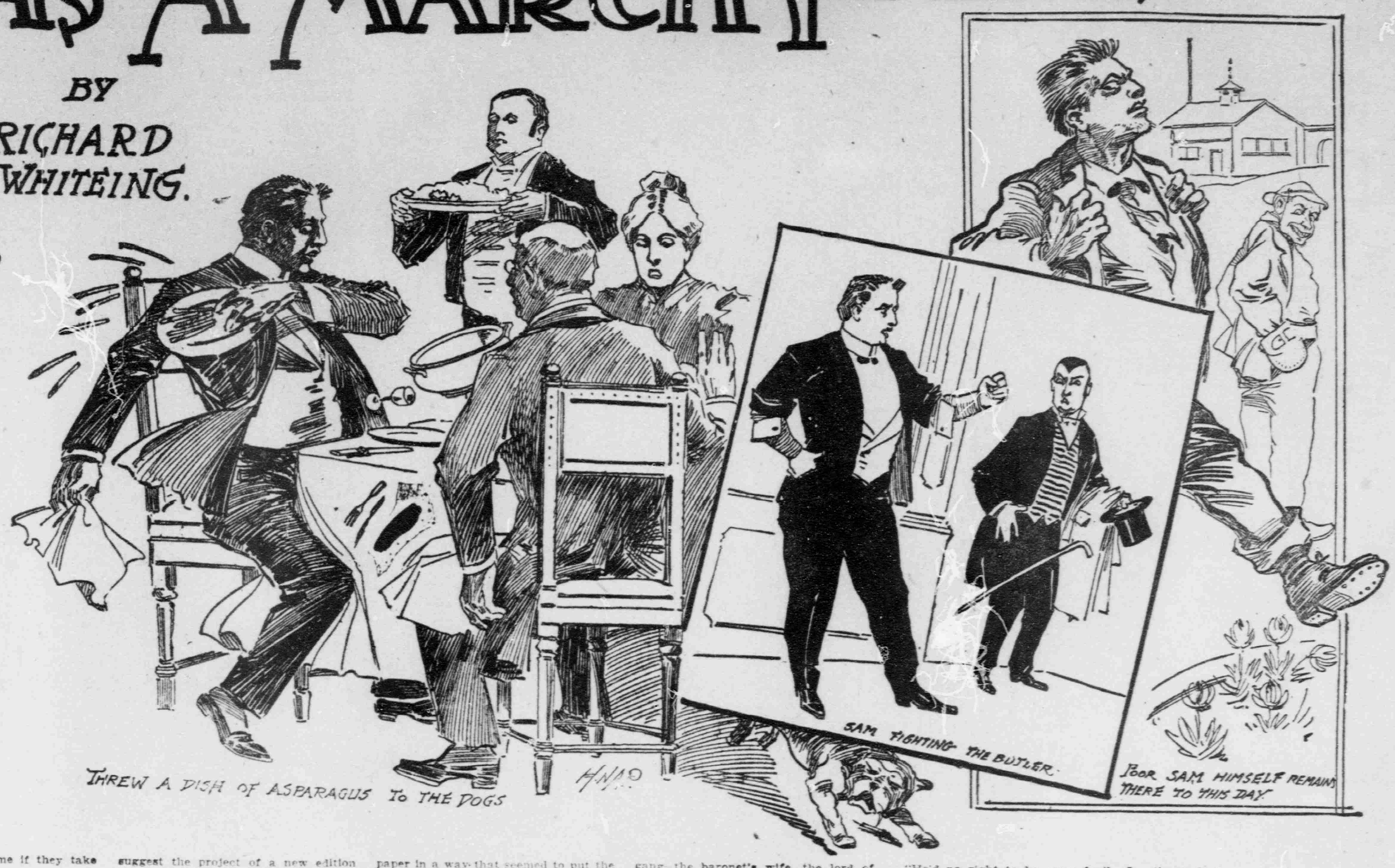
AS A MARCH HARE

BY RICHARD WHITEING.





THREW A DISH OF ASPARAGUS TO THE DOGS

SAM FIGHTING THE BUTLER.

POOR SAM HIMSELF REMAINS THERE TO THIS DAY

IT is a strange story, no doubt, this story of my poor friend Sam, who, in full possession of his sanity, and with unfaltering purpose, never paused till he got himself shut up in a lunatic asylum.

Yes, so it was; and for the simplest reason in the world. A chum of ours, Tom, by name, had lately been snatched from the midst of us and sent to a private institution of this sort. We had all three come together at an army-coaching place.

To be quite candid about it, there was a strong suspicion of foul play on the part of Tom's uncle, a retired major at the head of the establishment; who hoped ultimately to have the handling of his nephew's considerable fortune.

We had continued to let the captive know that a rescue would be attempted. We felt that if we could get into actual touch with him, and have the full particulars of the case, we could soon set him free. But there was no doing this by ordinary means. Formal visits of the sort that take place before witnesses, who are also spies, were quite out of the question. Only long confidential intercourse, for a period, with the wronged man, free from all supervision, could give us what we wanted to make a case of redress.

Sam was naturally of a chivalrous, not to say a Quixotic turn.

"I'll do it," he said one day when we had talked over ways and means for the hundredth time. "I'll sham eccentricity till I get them to run me into the same lockup. Then, as soon as I get poor Tom's story, I'll make England too hot to hold them till they let him out."

"Absurd!"

"Nothing of the kind; the most practical proceeding in the world."

"Suppose they don't put you into the same asylum?"

"There's no other in twenty miles. The same doctors—and they will be the same, no doubt—the same jury."

"Ridiculous!"

"But to condescend to particulars. Why?"

"I never heard of such a thing."

"Oh, as to that Eddicott—well, I'm going to have a shy at it, anyway. I shall start shamming mad tomorrow, and mind you, back me up."

"I don't like the looks of it, it's too wild."

"Do drop thinking so much about yourself, my dear fellow. What about the under dog?"

"But where do I come in as a backer?"

"In this way. Your cue is, I've been very funny lately, though you haven't cared to speak about it; and I ought really to keep this side up with care."

He quite knew what he wanted. I only half knew what I did not want. It is hardly necessary to state the result. I agreed to stand in with him, and I was the only person in the secret.

Next morning he entered into the business of losing his wits with the most stupendous gravity. He began gently to develop a bit of unreasonableness that would have tried the temper of a saint. He muddled his work, sulked when they tried to help him and finally stormed under a mild rebuke. He was clever enough, of course, to make it easy going at first. He suffered the storm to pass off in a fit of gentle melancholy that spoiled our bridge party that evening and sent most of us miserable to bed. I wished him good night when he was taking his candle, but he cut me dead.

Next day he was better, only he wouldn't speak to a soul, except in answer to a question. He did his work, wrote his letters, but insisted on taking them to the post. And he broke up the bridge party again by spending the evening in what seemed to be elaborate preparations for making his will.

They had the family doctor—not the mad one as yet—to luncheon next day. The artful patient veered round into perfect propriety for the occasion and talked like a book. The doctor looked puzzled; the wicked uncle foolish. But as soon as the man of science had gone away, leaving a confidential prescription for golf, poor Sam worked up an entirely one-sided quarrel with the butler and asked him if he wanted to fight.

"I wish I could see more into your game," I said, when we met that night. "Why?"

"Well, you are so off and on, hot and cold. You're mad enough when there's nobody looking, but the moment they send for a witness you might give points to a dove."

"That's my low cunning. The insane are the greatest hypocrites alive. I'm done for in no time if they take me at that."

The offer of a few days' rest put him in a real temper, as threatening unnecessary delay. He now had an upset with the chief on some frivolous pretext—of course entirely unconnected with the real matter in hand—and gave it to him with a straightness that left nothing to be desired. Then they wrote to his relatives. One of these came—Colonel Dinningham, a good old fellow, but I should say rather soft. Then Sam began his wretched by-play again.

He took the colonel by the arm, trotted him all over the grounds, and sounded the praises of the tutor and his family. The old chap was mystified; and it seemed a bit too deep for the others, too. At any rate, they never thought of making an excuse for putting him away, or even turning him out. I fancy they were unwilling to have a second affair of the same sort so soon after the first. It might get the place a bad name.

He wished them all anywhere for fools at our next private conference, and afterward plunged into greater extravagances than ever by way of forcing the pace. He began to read all advertisements in the papers—at any rate those relating to food and health—and professed to regard them with almost religious veneration as the witnesses of truth. There was nothing which he was not ready to believe in this line, or to do. He spent much of his leisure in leaping over a fence as a test of the efficacy of his diet. And on days when the result seemed satisfactory he asked us, as a particular favor, to address him as Sunny Sam. He changed his bill of fare every morning and he may be said to have breakfasted on fads. When they offered him meat he pushed it from him and wailed out a supplication for protene. He clamored for nuts at the most unreasonable hour, literally threw a dish of asparagus to the dogs, wallowed in raspberry juice and mineral waters, and professed to regard his progress in the absorption of albumen as others regard their progress in virtue. When he wanted another slice of toast he used the idiotic formula, "Pass the breadstuffs."

There was no limit to it. He ordered a monster weighing apparatus and a pocket tape, and used them at every meal. You would find him at lunch in his solitary chair, nibbling a banana, and waiting to leave off at the turn of the scale.

When anything went wrong with him—and, of course, something went wrong, pretty well every day—he tried to cure himself with advertised medicines. His room became a sort of museum of these preparations. The walls were almost repapered with testimonials, pinned up under headings that seemed to include all the ills in the heirship of flesh. Now and then he invited strange beings to his room—understood to be patentees—and offered them their own preparations as light refreshments—not invariably, I thought, to their satisfaction. He tabulated five-and-twenty prescriptions for dyspepsia, each warranted as the only way to salvation. The earnestness with which he discussed this conflict of testimony seemed to suggest the project of a new edition of that well-known publication, "Some Difficulties of Belief."

It all went for nothing. The family were startled, no doubt, but, if only for the prudential reasons already mentioned, they made no sign of doing what he wanted. When I sought him as usual in his room he seemed gloomy in the extreme.

"Hang 'em!" he said. "What more will they have? I'm at the end of my tether."

"Just what I think."

"I'll have another go at 'em, for all that. But I must change the bowling, or the tactics, at any rate."

"I really begin to fancy it's no go."

"That's not like you."

"What's the matter with it?"

"To turn tail."

"No; I only mean"——

"You only mean you've forgotten a poor devil—your friend as well as mine—biting his nails off in that horrible hole. I tell you he worries me in my dreams. And, mark my words, if anything happens to him worse will happen to us.

"My dear Sam, what are you driving at?"

"He'll do something to himself if they keep him there much longer. And if we let him be murdered—for that's what it's coming to—he'll walk."

"Banquo's ghost."

"You tire me."

"You are certainly mad enough, in all reason."

"Well, why don't they play up to me?"

"It's funny," I said; "there was nothing the matter with poor Tom; and see where he is now! The bigger the crank the worse the chance, one might almost say."

"Well, do say it—say it again," he said, brightening up as if struck with a sudden idea.

"What on earth do you mean?"

"Never mind; say it again."

I did so.

"That'll do," and he snapped his fingers with huge satisfaction and danced about the room.

I felt really uneasy about him. You're quite sure you haven't been carrying this thing on too long?"

"Perhaps so; but I shan't have to carry it on much longer. Good night."

"But really do explain, won't you?"

"Go away!"

And I had to leave it so. His behavior changed entirely in the course of the next few days. All the waywardness and violence vanished. He was "hail fellow" with anybody, courteous and gentle to the last degree, hard working to a fault. The advertisements were swept into limbo, the author's testimonials were sent about their business, and the study of their works was replaced by that of the "Critique of Pure Reason." He played his rubber with the rest of us, and altogether conducted himself with so much sweetness and light that a small dinner party was given to celebrate his recovery, and his relative, the colonel, was asked.

It was a sultry evening and the windows of the dining room were thrown open. As Sam and I strolled in from the lawn after the second bell, the table looked wonderfully pretty under the rose-colored shades. The colonel was with us. Sam talked weather and non-committal items from the evening paper in a way that seemed to put the old gentleman entirely at his ease.

We entered the drawing room, which also communicated with the lawn. As a mark of favor, Sam was asked to take down the hostess, and he smiled, as though in grateful acknowledgment of the attention. Then, without a word of warning or the slightest change of countenance, he quietly took off his dress coat and offered his shirt-sleeved arm to the old lady with a bow. She was too utterly upset to decline it; and, still discussing the beauty of the evening with the easiest manner in the world, he hauled her in.

It nearly wrecked the dinner at the start. The terrified woman could hardly mutter the responses, and the colonel and the head of the house exchanged looks of consternation. It was impossible to pass it over in silence, yet the major was evidently at a loss as to the right thing to say. At length, he ventured on:

"Dinner first, Mr. Filby; billiards after, if you don't mind."

"Thanks; but I don't think I'll play tonight, it's so warm."

In all my life I have never sat down to a more wretched, uncomfortable meal. They were naturally unwilling, in the circumstances, to make a scene about it; but they were silent and embarrassed, as though hesitating between the impulse to pitch him out, with coat after him, or to offer him the long-desired strait-waistcoat in exchange.

He alone seemed wholly unmoved. And as to conversation, I am bound to say I have rarely heard him in better form.

The courses succeeded each other in gloomy procession, as at an Egyptian banquet of the dead. He worked his way through them with perfect self-possession uptil it came to the third remove, when he arose with a bow to the whole company and made his way to the door.

"Won't you finish your dinner." And, passing again into the drawing-room, he resumed his coat and finally appeared on the lawn again, in rapt observation of the moon. "Aren't you playing it rather low down on us?" I said, when the wretched business was all over, and we had our usual meeting in his room. I was still in full sympathy with his purpose, but I must say I could not help feeling for the company, too.

"I'm playing it according to the rules—the new ones. Ten to one they would stand it a week longer; will that do?"

I threw up my window before turning in. The wicked uncle was showing the colonel to the gate. The dear old chap seemed much distressed.

"Give him one more chance," I heard the colonel say. "It would be such a dreadful blow to his poor mother."

"One more, then, for her sake, colonel; but only one. I have my own family to think of."

There was a knock at my door. It was my poor chum. He seemed quite upset.

"Read that—you see there's no time to lose," and thrusting a bit of dirty paper through the chink, he went back to his room.

It bore these words in lead pencil, "Look alive, Sam."

Our hostess held her weakly tea-party next day. There was the usual gang—the baronet's wife, the lord of the manor's daughter, and so on; myself—by accident—a drawing-room minstrel (you know the type), and a young fellow in orders, who was so regular that we used to call him the curate-in-charge. The chatter was in full flow when, to our surprsie, Sam dropped in.

He said very little at first, but bustled about with the muffins, and with an occasional sigh of weariness, looked longingly toward the door.

"You are very silent," said the old lady in a rallying tone.

"I don't happen to have anything to say," he returned sweetly.

They exchanged meaning glances and shook their heads. Presently he took a volume of "Half Hours With the Best Authors" and asked us if we would care to listen to a rational word. And without waiting for an answer he began to read some awful rigmarole from an old Spectator on the frivolity of modern fashionable conversation.

It was short and sharp work at last. The general practitioner called in the mad doctor—the one who had done Tom's business—and even the poor old colonel was obliged to acquiesce, though not without a final effort. He removed Sam to a small farm belonging to the family in the same quarter of the country as our place.

"There's not much hope, I fear," he said to me, with tears in his eyes; "but my baliff will be there to look after him, and the active employment may give the poor lad another chance."

It was no go. At the farm he went on more outrageously than ever. He began by raising the wages of the agricultural laborers all around, and, what was worse, giving most of those who were able to do the least. A ditcher, with a family of five who had rubbed on for years at fifteen shillings and his firewood—the current wages of the country—was instantly raised to a pound and his coals. At the same time an old couple, almost bedridden, who lived mainly on a pittance from the parish and scraps from the houses, which they had to fetch in all weathers, were advanced to twenty-five shillings and put under the care of a nurse provided by their employer. The milk allowance from the house was continued, but Sam actually carried it himself to save the old gaffer the toil of mounting the hill. This, by the way, made the ditcher extremely discontented. He began to shake his head over his master, with the rest, and to declare he ought to be put away. In fact, he loudly expressed his readiness to "go into the box" against him, should anything of that sort be required.

The doctors and a family lawyer, who now had his finger in the pie, pressed Sam hard on this point. He was deaf to all argument, though always with the suavity which was the most exasperating thing about him.

"It will raise wages all over the country," they urged, dealing first with the ditchers' case.

"So much the better; that's just what I want to do."

"But it won't leave a penny of profit for the estate at the end of the year.

"Then we'd better give up farming and take to something else."

"The man was very well satisfied before."

"He'd no right to be, poor devil. I assure you I cut it as low as I possibly could. Did you ever happen to look at the soles of his children's shoes?"

"Tut, tut!" said the solicitor, but one of the doctors gave him a warning look.

"The irreducible minimum—that's all I want for them. Why, even now they get fresh meat only three times a week."

"Stuff and nonsense!" said the solicitor, losing his temper again. "Where do you come in?"

"Only after the others, of course. But I've gone on getting board and lodging, so far."

"Very good, very good, indeed," said the mad doctor, trying to pose him on the other case. "The ditcher can do his day's work after all, but what about the two old derelicts who can't do a stroke and get five shillings more, not to speak of jelly and port wine from the house?"

"You see they want it more."

"They are so entirely useless."

"So entirely helpless, too, I do assure you."

"Do you call that paying people according to their services?"

"No; only paying them according to their wants."

"I give him up," said the colonel, "when this came to his ears. It was as good as done now. Each of the doctors saw him separately, and wrote his certificate, and the certificates were laid before a justice of the peace. All three were for detention, and in due time he was ready to be taken away.

The comedy of the transaction was exquisite. They thought they were fooling him when they persuaded him to accompany them in a carriage for a short drive. He knew he was fooling them when he assented to their proposal to call on an old acquaintance, and the carriage drew up at the door of the very asylum in which our friend was confined. Sam had expressed a wish for my company, and I was accommodated with a seat on the box. After the quiet completion of the formalities, in another room, he was handed over to the urbane proprietor of the establishment. They promised to call for him soon. He begged them not to hurry, and we drove away. I had no opportunity of speaking to him, but he gave me a wink of triumph which I shall never forget. And when I got home I found a letter somehow contrived to get posted, and this was how it ran:

Dear Dick: Glory, I've done it at last. By the time you get this I shall be under the same roof with our poor chum, and hard at work on his case. We'll have him out in no time, and bring that old villain, the major, to the stool of repentance.

But, burn this as soon as you have read it, and don't give me away by any premature disclosures.

It was slow work at first, I must say, and I was feeling as tired of it as you were, but, after all, the farce has given me infinite delight. And now for my secret—the secret I could not confide to you for fear you should spoil the game. You remember that day when I was so down in the dumps and you said something without knowing it, which put me on the right tack? What you said was this: "The bigger the fool, the worse chance of getting into an asylum."

That was just it. I saw in a flash that I had all along been going in the wrong line in playing up to them with more extravagance and absurdities. My outrageous tempers, all my wild waste of good money with the advertised foods and advertised medicines, wouldn't do the trick, though they might have proved any man as mad as a March hare. They were willing to make all sorts of excuses for me, so long as I merely behaved like a fool. Then came your wonderful tip that gave me the secret at last. If you want everybody to think you mad, you have only to live according to reason.

The moment I saw this the thing was done. We're all so frightfully sympathetic to eccentricity, so horribly hostile to sense and truth. As soon as I began to be reasonable they were ready to put me away. I removed a garment because I didn't want to wear superfluous clothing on a hot day. They shook their heads over me at once. I rose from the table as soon as I had had enough, and left a dining-room with the atmosphere of a kitchen for the pure air outside. I was madder than ever. But where was the madman? Choose between this silly people stuffing themselves with indigestion and the wise man with a care for his health. Was I less wise, when I said nothing when I happened to have nothing to say? Why, the finest order in the world is founded on a rule of silence; and who was the sage who said he had sometimes repented of talking, never of holding his tongue? My treatment of my workpeople capped the climax—in fact, it has sent me to the mad house at last. Yet what is it but a touch of pure reason in human relations? You know the immortal maxim, the finest contribution of the ages to the science of being: "From each, according to his powers; to each, according to his needs." It is a whole gospel to the higher life, yet you have only to act on it to find yourself in a madman's cell.

We very soon had Tom at liberty. Nothing could withstand the array of facts which his friend collected and smuggled out, and which I got published in papers.

There is but one drawback; poor Sam himself, I regret to say, remains there to this day. It is regarded as a hopeless case. I am publishing this at last, and, I am bound to add, a despairing effort to procure his release.

McCURDY WRITES A POEM.

Richard A. McCurdy, who recently resigned his lucrative and not overly arduous job as president of a big life insurance company in New York, has broken into the ranks of the poets—just for amusement, he says—and has written "A Bacillian Romance," dedicated to a sanitary association. There are nine verses on this order:

Bacillus admired Bacteria,
And he thought her uncommonly fine,
Till an attack of acute hysteria
Broke up the ideal combine.
And she flew down the throat of the captain
Of a popular baseball nine.

WASTE NO TIME!

While it may not be a crime
It's a foolish waste of time,
As a blind man ought to see,
To attempt to make a touch,
Though you do not ask for much,
On the pocketbook of young John D.
—Chicago News.